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ABSTRACT

In "The Story of Little Black Sambo," initially written for her own children and published in 1898, Helen Bannerman describes the adventures of a young dark-skinned child and four tigers. Because it was smaller and more manageable than most children's books of the time--text and illustrations were positioned on the same page for high child interest--it was quite revolutionary. These early Bannerman stories were meant for European and White American children, and for many of them the stories comfortably continued racist notions and stereotypes. Although Bannerman's Black Sambo was supposed to represent an Indian child, the American Sambo which appeared in subsequent books was clearly African. Some Black adults recall being in white settings and feeling embarrassed and demeaned by the association with "Sambo." In the 1940s and 1950s, Sambo stories appeared on many public school and library approved lists, but, by 1980, the Little Black Sambo series had been relegated to the historical bookshelves. As early as 1949, however, Black parents had appealed to public education boards to discontinue the use of a book which they felt was discriminatory and racist. For a while after Sambo's disappearance, there was no presence of African Americans at all in children's literature. In the past 25 years, however, a body of literature with images that celebrates and elevates African children, family and culture has been created by authors-illustrators such as Eloise Greenfeld, Julius Lester, John Steptoe, Virginia Hamilton, and Leo and Diane Dillon. The role of the classroom teacher includes being an advocate for the development of positive self images for all children through a heightened sense of responsibility in the selection of children's literature. (Contains 6 references.) (CR)

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LITTLE BLACK SAMBO AND THE LEGACY OF IMAGE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

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In this paper, we are going to examine children's literature in the United States historically, and image specifically as it is conveyed through illustrations in African American children's literature.

Within this paradigm, we must begin this survey with the Little Black Sambo stories. Helen Bannerman published The Story of Little Black Sambo in 1898. In the story, Mrs. Bannerman describes the adventures of a young dark skinned child and four tigers.

The stories were initially written and illustrated by Bannerman for her own children. Her family had been expatriated to India in service to the Queen. When Mrs. Bannerman was separated from her children for long periods of time, she would send to them these small stories.

At the turn of the century when The Story of Little Black Sambo entered the children's book market, it was quite revolutionary. Until this time, most children's books were quite large and difficult for small hands to manipulate. Mrs. Bannerman's book was considerably smaller and manageable. Text and illustrations were positioned on the same page for high child interest.

Suffice it to say, the book sold extremely well. So well, that it was soon published in Germany, Spain, France, and yes, the United States. The book's popularity was not only due to its form and structure. For many Europeans and Americans, this story comfortably continued racist notions and stereotypes in these seemingly innocent children's books.

Before we talk further about The Story of Little Black Sambo, I think it is important to ask how many people have read this book before? Unfortunately, the Los Angeles Public Library was unable to produce this book for my research. The Sambo story and other blatantly racist and discriminatory books have been taken off the active book shelves. They have been placed in the controlled books section. This action by diligent librarians and community activists represents some of the positive actions resulting from the Sambo legacy.

I participated in a program offered by the University of California at Los Angeles called the Institute on Primary Sources. This fine program opened up the Special Collections section of the University Research Library to teachers doing research and developing lessons using primary sources and other rare documents. It was here that I read my first Bannerman.

While conducting my research for this paper, one of my white colleagues asked me, "What's wrong with Little Black Sambo? I loved those stories as a child." The problem with this particular title and the many additional American published versions of the book with Black Sambo, Black Mingo, Black Quibba, Little Kettlehead, Black Quasha, and Black Bobtail as the central characters is the negative effect these materials have on our children and their self image. While whites may feel amused by the little witty Black boy, it was in no way funny to Black people. These stories were another opportunity to demean African Americans both in unflattering pictures and a text that supported racial stereotypes.

In analyzing literature there are many paradigms to evaluate children's literature (approach, writing style, characterization, language and bias), however, the area of illustration is critical within this framework of self image. Pictures in children's books supplement the test of a story in ways adult books do not. Many children select books solely on the illustrations. The visual for young children becomes so important in their relationships with books through the illustrations. Some children identify others through the same illustrations. Therefore, if books portray Black people as repulsive characters in negative stereotypes and images of abnormally proportioned body parts (specifically lips, eyes and hips) our children either identify with these images or are identified by others through these racist images.

The power of image in illustrations became crystal clear to me when I spoke with another colleague who recalled the use of the Sambo book in her second grade class as a child. This mentor, this veteran educator, this grandmother told me she still cringes at the sound of Sambo's name. As she and the other children sat on the rug for their read aloud time, this woman recalls wanting to make herself dissolve into the floor because her white classmates would see her as Sambo. Some fifty years later this adult remembers the affect--the emotional impact <u>The Story of Little Black Sambo</u> had on her.

These early Bannerman stories were not meant for Black children. They were written and published for European and white American children and their families. To this end, an~~d~~ examination of the illustrations from 1898-1950 reveal an incredible change in the veracity of the images which seem to coincide with American racial oppression.

Although Bannerman's Black Sambo was supposed to represent an Indian child, the American Sambo which appeared in subsequent books was clearly African. As a point of information, Bannerman sold all rights to her story as a condition of publication. So when the Sambo stories appeared in America, the legacy was continued by other entrepreneur's characterizations and images with which Americans could readily identify. Artists drew Sambo in the tradition of Al Jolson and the minstrels with the large whitened lips and eyes. Black Mambo, Sambo's mother, who had always been a fat woman now had an unmistakable resemblance to Aunt Jemima.

There was now no question of Black Sambo's ethnicity. He was undoubtedly African American. When young white American children saw Black children, many called the child "Sambo". This became a widely used nickname for African children and adults in the 1920's-1950's. In fact, a national chain of restaurants was called "Sambo's".

By the 1940's and 1950's, Sambo stories appeared on many public school and library approved book lists. These books were used in both integrated and segregated public institutions. In the Black classrooms and libraries, some Black professionals approved and used these materials. These books were the only materials that existed for young children with Black characters. Some librarians and teachers accepted the degradation in exchange for the presence of Black faces. White public institutions found no moral dilemma where the Sambo stories were concerned. Book reviewers from this period were resoundingly delighted by the stories and illustrations, and found the stories quite appropriate for young children. These trade reviews aided in making the Sambo stories some of the largest selling children's books in U.S. history.

Some adults remember sitting in those classrooms or library reading circles. They remember in white settings having all eyes on them as their white counterparts saw them as the Sambo of the story, and giggled and pointed. Some adults have recalled feeling embarrassed and demeaned by the association, and dreading the name calling sessions later when they invariably would be called "Sambo".

These same ridiculed children later became the adult activist who lead the next phase of the Sambo Legacy -- its demise.

As early as 1949, Black parents appealed to public education boards to discontinue the use of a book which they felt was discriminatory and racist. Many cities grappled with this issue of the self image of Black children versus a well loved and classic children's book. In most cases, the parent's requests were turned down. Early in the struggle however, cities like Toronto, Canada and Lincoln, Nebraska had removed the book from school shelves. But more often than not, removal was not approved.

By the 1960's and 1970's, the stories of Black Sambo had been around for more than half a century. Two major factors hastened the removal of these and similarly racist children's books. First, growing Black consciousness and organized protest along with legislation demanded that books with negative images be removed from public institutions. Secondly, social scientists and educators with a special interest in development theory began to speak out about the devastating effects of racist children's books on the development of African American children.

This two sided assault on Black Sambo weakened the support base for this book. By 1980, the Little Black Sambo series had been relegated to the historical book shelves. Many publishers attempted to keep the book alive by drastically changing the illustrations to more realistic pictures. But the day of the Sambo presence in children's literature had passed.

With Sambo's disappearance, there was a period in which there was not a presence of African Americans at all in children's literature. Elementary school reading texts which featured the "Dick and Jane" characters had no black characters at all. When some texts later included Black faces in the illustrations, there no supporting story lines to suggest these African children had an identity, a family, a history, a culture nor even a voice. They certainly were not Sambo, but their quiet submissive presence sent out a clear message just the same.

Publishers of children's books publish what schools and libraries want. This quiet, directionless, and unobtrusive image became the new Black presence in children's literature in the 1960's. This passive persona was not the image the Black community wanted in those turbulent times. The struggle against Black Sambo left a void. A void that was filled by another image just as virulent as the old Sambo presence had been on school shelves.

The task became clear. School book selection committees and library selection committees had to be infiltrated by Black professionals and activists. They then became part of a process that decided what types of public materials would be purchased with public funds. Concurrently, noted authors, illustrators, educators, librarians, and members of the publishing industry founded the Council on Interracial Books for Children to encourage the creation and distribution of non-racist books for children.

This new message to the publishing barons was very distinct. The charge as defined by child development specialists to the publishing world was a platform for the next and most important phase of the Sambo legacy -- the era of the Black child centered books.

Developmentalists believe that self image is an important component of self esteem. A child's self image develops very early in life, and is well rooted in the affective domain. Self image can be developed, nurtured and molded in a positive educational setting. Conversely, self image can be destroyed or stunted in a non-caring and racist system in which inappropriate educational materials aid in the child's destruction of self love.

It was necessary that a body of literature be created that nurtured the self image of African American children. This new literature had to place Black child protagonists within a clear context. These characters needed to be seen in a family setting. African American children have a place in a family in which they are respected and valued no matter their gender. Images needed to be created that showed the duplicity of family configurations. Children must see the range of valid family structures -- be they single parent, extended or grandparent led families. It would follow then that families needed to be portrayed within the context of a community. A community that has a culture, a history, and traditions and values that can support any child who happens to look like the main character.

A lot to expect from children's books? A utopic charge for authors and illustrators? No, I don't think so. In fact, for the past 25 years, these new image makers have answered this call with an impressive body of beautiful exciting and inspiring books for and about African American children.

If the Sambo image could thrive and live for almost 75 years demeaning Black children in America, a new canon of literature with images that celebrate and elevate African children, family and culture must also thrive. Image making authors-illustrators like, Eloise Greenfield, Julius Lester, John Steptoe, Virginia Hamilton, and Leo and Diane Dillon are prolific contributors to this literature.

No, the Black Sambo legacy is not dead in the United States. Black Sambo is alive and well when teachers ask, "What's wrong with Little Black Sambo?". We still have additional work to do in this area.

Additional research on the project directs me to the internationalization of the Sambo image and the resulting process of normalization which has occured because of this image. The Sambo image is used repeatedly in Asia and Europe. In countries with large African populations, like Brazil, we see the acceptance of the Sambo image as a normal and acceptable part of the imagery of African children. As advocates for African children our work is not done.

It is interesting to note that our communities have historically addressed the needs of African children in education settings. We are recognizing that our children need to be fortified with high self esteem and a positive self image to navigate a racist society.

The role of the classroom teacher in providing a print rich environment is multi-faceted and extremely important. Our role includes that of advocate for the development of positive self images for all children through a heighted sense of responsibility in our selection of children's literature.

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